

CAREER GUIDE FOR PARALEGALS AND LEGAL ASSISTANTS

SOC Code: 23-2011

Pay Band: 3 ([Salary Structure](#))

Standard Occupational Description: Paralegals and legal assistants assist lawyers by researching legal precedent, investigating facts, or preparing legal documents. They conduct research to support a legal proceeding, to formulate a defense, or to initiate legal action. The terms paralegal and legal assistant may be used interchangeably.

If you would like more information on the career field of paralegals and legal assistants, go to <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos114.htm>, for a more detailed look at the field prepared by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Paralegal and legal assistant positions in the Commonwealth are assigned to the following Roles in the [Administrative and Office Support](#) Career Group:

Administrative and Office Specialist III

While Paralegals and Legal Assistants within the Commonwealth are all located within the Administrative and Office Support Career Group, individuals may want to pursue career advancement, more technical, or managerial opportunities within the Commonwealth depending upon individual training, education, knowledge, skills, abilities, and interests.

Other Career Group(s) that may be of interest are:

[Hearing and Legal Services](#),

[Policy Analysis and Planning](#)

[Land Acquisition and Property Management](#)

[Audit and Management Services](#)

[Public Safety Compliance](#)

[General Administration](#)

Some employees may decide to use their experience as a paralegal/legal assistance to see if they are interested in pursuing a career as an attorney. A career as an attorney requires a four-year undergraduate degree, and additional graduate studies at a law school.

SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, ABILITIES AND TASKS

(Technical and Functional Expertise)

Skills

Note: The technical and functional skills listed below are based on general occupational qualifications for Paralegals and Legal Assistants commonly recognized by most employers. Typically, you will not be required to have all of the skills listed to be a successful performer. Recruitment and selection standards for an individual state job must be based on the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities for that job as indicated in the job announcement and job description in the Employee Work Profile.

Skills

1. Understanding written sentences and paragraphs in work related documents.

2. Communicating effectively in writing as appropriate for the needs of the audience.
3. Using logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions or approaches to problems.
4. Talking to others to convey information effectively.
5. Bringing others together and trying to reconcile differences.
6. Giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times.
7. Adjusting actions in relation to others' actions.
8. Persuading others to change their minds or behavior.
9. Identifying complex problems and reviewing related information to develop and evaluate options and implement solutions.
10. Understanding the implications of new information for both current and future problem solving and decision-making.

Knowledge

Note: The technical and functional knowledge statements listed below are based on general occupational qualifications for Paralegals and Legal Assistants commonly recognized by most employers. Typically, you will not be required to have all of the knowledge listed to be a successful performer. Recruitment and selection standards for an individual state job must be based on the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities for that job as indicated in the job announcement and job description in the Employee Work Profile.

The **Knowledge** of:

1. Laws, legal codes, court procedures, precedents, government regulations, executive orders, agency rules, and the democratic political process.
2. Administrative and clerical procedures and systems such as word processing, managing files and records, stenography and transcription, designing forms, and other office procedures and terminology.
3. The structure and content of the English language including the meaning and spelling of words, rules of composition, and grammar.
4. Circuit boards, processors, chips, electronic equipment, and computer hardware and software, including applications and programming.
5. Business and management principles involved in strategic planning, resource allocation, human resources modeling, leadership technique, production methods, and coordination of people and resources.

Abilities

Note: The technical and functional abilities listed below are based on general occupational qualifications for Paralegals and Legal Assistants commonly recognized by most employers. Typically, you will not be required to have all of the abilities listed to be a successful performer. Recruitment and selection standards for an individual state job must be based on the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities for that job as indicated in the job announcement and job description in the Employee Work Profile.

The **Ability** to:

1. Read and understand information and ideas presented in writing.
2. Listen to and understand information and ideas presented through spoken words and sentences.
3. Communicate information and ideas in writing so others will understand.
4. Communicate information and ideas in speaking so others will understand.
5. Apply general rules to specific problems to produce answers that make sense.
6. See details at close range (within a few feet of the observer).
7. Combine pieces of information to form general rules or conclusions (includes finding a relationship among seemingly unrelated events).

8. Arrange things or actions in a certain order or pattern according to a specific rule or set of rules (e.g., patterns of numbers, letters, words, pictures, mathematical operations).
9. Speak clearly so others can understand you.
10. Come up with a number of ideas about a topic (the number of ideas is important, not their quality, correctness, or creativity).
11. Add, subtract, multiply, or divide quickly and correctly.
12. Remember information such as words, numbers, pictures, and procedures.
13. Concentrate on a task over a period of time without being distracted.

Tasks

Note: The following is a list of sample tasks typically performed by Paralegals and Legal Assistants. Employees in this occupation will not necessarily perform all of the tasks listed.

1. Gathers and analyzes research data, such as statutes, decisions, and legal articles, codes, and documents.
2. Prepares legal documents, including briefs, pleadings, appeals, wills, contracts, and real estate closing statements.
3. Investigates facts and law of cases to determine causes of action and to prepare cases.
4. Prepares affidavits or other documents, maintains document file, and files pleadings with court clerk.
5. Appraises and inventories real and personal property for estate planning.
6. Arbitrates disputes between parties and assists in real estate closing process.
7. Calls upon witnesses to testify at hearing.
8. Answers questions regarding legal issues pertaining to civil service hearings.
9. Directs and coordinates law office activity, including delivery of subpoenas.
10. Keeps and monitors legal volumes to ensure that law library is up-to-date.
11. Presents arguments and evidence to support appeal at appeal hearing.

INTERESTED?

Like people, occupations have traits or characteristics. These characteristics give important clues about the nature of the work and work environment, and give you an opportunity to match your own personal interests to a specific occupation. When you choose a job in an occupation that matches your own interests you have taken an important step in planning a successful and rewarding career.

Paralegal and legal assistant work is called mainly an “**Enterprising Occupation**” because it involves work activities that frequently involve starting up and carrying out projects. These occupations can involve leading people and making many decisions. Sometimes they require risk taking and often deal with business.

Paralegal and legal assistant occupations are also “**Conventional**” because they often involve following set procedures and routines. These occupations can include working with data and details more than with ideas. Usually there is a clear line of authority to follow.

Paralegal and legal assistant occupations often involve helping or providing service to others, and frequently involve working with, communicating with, or even teaching people. Therefore, there is a “**Social**” element to paralegal and legal assistant work.

LICENSURE, REGISTRATION, OR CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Generally these are not required for paralegal and legal assistant positions in state government. However, to improve career advancement opportunities, you should consider the advantages of demonstrating your expertise and include this step in your personal career development plan.

There are several exams and certificate programs that are non-biased ways to demonstrate capability in the field. They are not required for employment in Virginia, but are one way to showcase your abilities to a prospective hiring official.

For example, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc. (NFPA) has developed an advanced competency exam for paralegals, the PACE Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam. For more information, go to <http://www.paralegals.org/PACE/home.html> or <http://www.paralegals.org/Choice/home.html>

The National Association of Legal Assistants offers CLA (Certified Legal Assistant) and CP (Certified Paralegal) Certificate Programs. Go to <http://www.nala.org> for more information.

EDUCATIONAL, TRAINING, AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Professional occupations like paralegal and legal assistant work usually require some college, such as an Associate's degree, and some job-specific training, such as a certificate in paralegal or legal assistant work. Increasingly, employers are looking for a four-year degree and specialized training. For more specific information training from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, go to <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos114.htm#training>.

- In Virginia, the Northern Virginia Community College in Alexandria offers a Paralegal Certificate program. For more information visit <http://www.nv.cc.va.us/alexandria/community/paralegal.htm>.
- The Northern Virginia Community College in Woodbridge also offers a Paralegal Certificate program. For more information visit <http://www.nv.cc.va.us/woodbridge/continuing/cert/paralegal.htm>.
- For more information on the academic and career development educational courses available at Virginia Community Colleges, visit the Virginia Community College System website at <http://www.so.cc.va.us>.
- There are multiple private centers that offer paralegal and legal assistant training. Be sure to thoroughly check the credentials of any private center before enrolling. The following associations maintain lists of schools and tips on what to consider in selecting the right place for you:
American Association for Paralegal Education <http://www.aafpe.org>
National Association of Legal Assistants <http://www.nala.org/>

COMMONWEALTH COMPETENCIES

Competencies are a set of identified behaviors, knowledge, skills, and abilities that directly and positively impact the success of employees and the organization. Competencies can be observed and measured. When consistently demonstrated, competencies make employees particularly effective in their work. Competencies help lay out a road map to career success. You can use the Commonwealth Competencies to help improve your individual performance by

adopting behaviors that make high performing employees successful in their jobs. In this way, you can use the Commonwealth Competencies for your further professional development.

The Commonwealth Competencies are:

1. Technical and Functional Expertise
2. Understanding the Business
3. Achieving Results
4. Serving the Customer
5. Teamwork
6. Interpersonal and Communication Skills
7. Leadership and Personal Effectiveness

The above competencies may be applied to employees throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. They can be rank-ordered by agencies and hiring managers to represent the needs of a specific job. The rank ordering will change depending upon the occupation, an organization's priorities, the actual job requirements, and the supervisor's preferences.

Career success is both about what you do (applying your technical knowledge, skills, and ability) and how you do it (the consistent behaviors you demonstrate and choose to use) while interacting and communicating with others. Hopefully, by studying the Commonwealth competencies, identifying your developmental opportunities, and working to refine your own competence, you can take charge of your career!

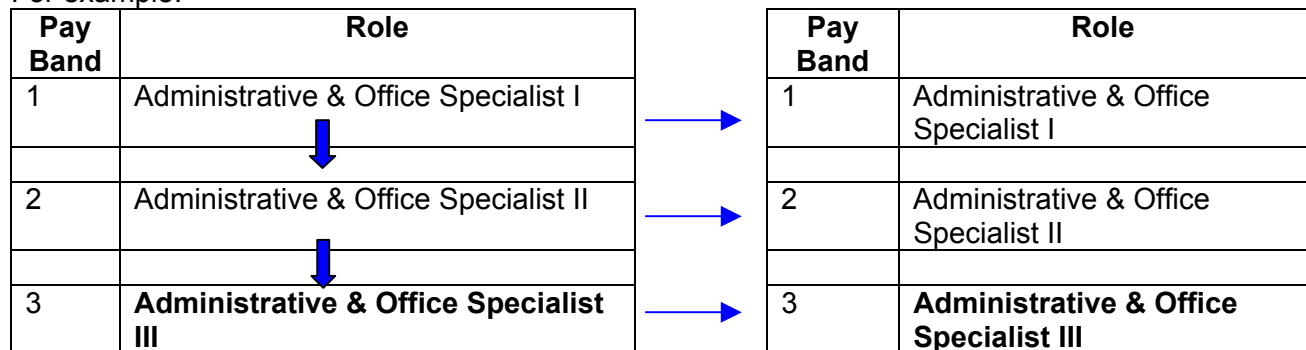
For additional information about the **Commonwealth Competencies** go to:

http://jobs.state.va.us/cc_planningctr.htm. For the competencies, we first list the competencies and then define each. Finally, we list competency indicators; to describe what successful performance looks like.

COMMONWEALTH CAREER PATH

Career opportunities in the Commonwealth are not limited to moving “up” to the next highest role and pay band, changing positions, or to becoming a supervisor. That’s because most roles describe a broad group of occupationally related positions that perform a range of work that requires increased knowledge and skills. For that reason, Commonwealth roles describe the career paths within the same or higher-level role for the same or different Career Group. The broad salary range and the Commonwealth’s pay practices provide flexibility in recognizing career development and advancement. ([Salary Structure](#))

For example:



Sample Career Path

Administrative and Office Specialist I

The Administrative and Office Specialist I role provides career tracks for operational and administrative support specialists such as the office support aides or postal aides providing entry-level support by performing well-defined office duties of a routine and repetitive nature under close supervision. The range of duties includes, but is not limited to, alphabetizing, filing, photocopying, sorting, delivering mail, and/or routine document processing.

Administrative and Office Specialist II

The Administrative and Office Specialist II role provides career tracks for operational and administrative support specialists such as office support assistants and secretaries who perform a wide variety of journey-level office/program and administrative support duties based on agency business needs. Duties are performed within specific guidelines using established policies and procedures. The range of duties includes, but is not limited to, general office, secretarial, fiscal, and support activities.

Administrative & Office Specialist III

Paralegals and legal assistants fall within the practitioner role of Administrative & Office Specialist III. At the top of the Administrative and Office Support Career Group, it is a role that positions the employee to transition to other career groups within the Administrative Services Family or even other occupational families within the Commonwealth’s job structure. (Go to [Job Structure](#) for a complete list of Commonwealth occupational families and career groups.)

In moving to another career group, which would begin at a minimum of a pay band 4, you will begin to specialize in a particular area, such as Hearing and Legal Services, Policy Planning & Analysis, Land Acquisition and Property Management, and more.

Paralegal and legal assistant work is used in a wide range of functional areas, providing employees in this occupation with opportunities to use their skills in a wide range of office environments where paralegal and legal assistant services are necessary to complete the mission of the agency. Your individual interests and experiences will play a large part in what career group and agency you choose to advance and enrich your career

ADDITIONAL OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT:

O*NET - Occupational Information Network (Online resource for career and occupational information.)
Go to http://online.onetcenter.org/gen_search_page and type in "paralegal" in the "find occupations" section, and then press GO.

Virginia Employment Commission – information on job openings.
<http://www.alex.vec.state.va.us/>

Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook – information on the career field of paralegal and legal assistant
<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos114.htm>,

Career One Stop - nationwide career resource and job search website.
<http://www.careeronestop.org/>

Virginia Career Resource Network
<http://www.vacrn.net/> (Type "paralegal" in "text search" then press search, then press "paralegal".)

Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia
http://www.ccps.virginia.edu/career_prospects/briefs/P-S/Paralegals.html